Backstage

A passing-the-time tale

Zero Philosophy
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There had been some kind of crossing. Whatever it was had left me dazed. Lucid ego was unobtainable at first. Irregular breathing stretched to the ends of a cramped universe.

“So, I’m dead,” I decided.

“Dead?” a voice scoffed, “hardly. You’re not even quiet.”

“But the body …”

“That thing?” it said. Some kind of laugh followed. “Oh, please!”

“It’s me,” I continued, pointing at the corpse like an imbecile, but my conviction was waning. “That was me.”

“Clearly not,” it mumbled. A note of boredom was creeping in. “It was something you confused yourself with, an *avatar* as you say. Of course, you are yourself the initial confusion. The fact could not easily be more obvious.”

“What now?” I pressed. It sounded more pathetic than intended. For no good reason, unless groping for dignity be some such, I re-phrased the question. “What comes next?”

Who or what am I then? That’s what I’d meant to ask, but it came out wrong. The voice with which I spoke was stammering slightly. I’d have thought it sounded scared.

I scrutinized my companion more closely. It was anthropoid in general form, although in some way unfinished. The plastic homogeneity of its substance evoked wax. Its eyes were simple voids, of which there were three.

The being’s sexual identity eluded me. It was perhaps perfectly unsexed.

There was nothing remotely disincarnate about my condition. The working body was a new one, unless all memory was a trick. It was too comfortable by far, but otherwise convincing. When I tapped the wall gently with one of my new fingers, all the components of sensibility held together.

The chamber, though not quite cramped, was almost so. It seemed to have been carved out of bare rock. No seams, or other signs of masonry, were visible. Tunnels led out from it in each of four directions. Nothing obviously favored any one of them.

Was there an Ancient Egyptian theme? Perhaps I merely imagined it. Hints of hieroglyphics scurried across the walls like spiderish shadows. They did not stop to be fixed upon. Images of ominous journeys flickered among the rush-lights. Spectral gods with animal heads watched impassively.

Death means *having no time*, and nothing else. When you're rushed, to the absolute limit, it's there. Anything that there's not enough time for is a piece of death. All this, in contrast, seemed unhurried, at least for the time being.

"Is this a dream?"

"Oh, poetry now," it mumbled, evidently unimpressed. It meant, I suppose, that the description makes no difference. Between a thing, and a dream of that thing, the distinction is inessential. Without some definite way of awakening, no state is meaningfully qualified by sleep. Perhaps, though, I merely guessed at its thoughts.

Curiosity mastered my reluctance. I stepped up to the corpse on the slab. Recognition was obscurely distressing.

"What is to be done with it?"

"That will not be your concern."

It made no sense for the body to be there. I trembled at the metaphysical violation. Now, finally, I examined my own hands. I had been afraid to do it. Doublings exploded recursively, until I stopped.

"What are you?" I asked.

"You do not recognize a dolh?" it replied.

"A dolh?" The word was entirely unfamiliar to me. It was somehow clear that it wasn't spelt 'dole' but pronunciation was no clue. "Like a doll?" I guessed.

"The other way around," it explained. "You forget, of course. Intermission events aren't locally recorded."

It was the opposite problem that confused me. "Why do I remember so much?"

“About the life last passed?” it asked. The sarcasm of the question still eluded me at that point.

“Exactly that,” I quickly agreed. “How can there be memories without a brain?”

“There are those who say *the brain is in the mind*, although it is not actually so simple. You probably need to see some things.”

It turned away, and set off down a corridor, without looking back, as if confidently expecting me to follow.

The thought of being left alone in the corpse room urged me after it. There was a peculiar horror to the idea, overwhelming any remnant of pride. For there to be no one but me, and what had been me, would be terrible in a way scarcely to be borne. Yet, at the same time, leaving the old body behind was also upsetting. There was a residual sense of attachment, and even dependency. Its manifest weakness felt like my weakness. Vulnerability had been consummated. The corpse’s still fingers, in particular, evoked an appalling sense of wounded self-regard. Everything had been a lurid lie.

It was not clear at that point how the corridor was illuminated. The friezes appeared endless. At least, they proceeded all the way into a perspectival vanishing point. Images were mixed with hieroglyphics. They hinted at legibility.

Books of the dead unfolded through them.

“Mostly it’s death,” I said.

“Still so lost,” the dolh mumbled, as if to itself.

Eventually I summoned the courtesy to ask: “Do you have a name?”

The dolh gazed at me mournfully. “Better not to have asked perhaps,” it said, “than to have asked so late.”

Further interrogation appeared useless on this front.

As we passed the scenes, I struggled to comprehend them.

“They’re being born,” I guessed, with misplaced confidence.

“You’re still confused about time,” was the immediate reply. “Nobody simply *gets in at the beginning*.”

“So when do they get in?”

“Listen to yourself.”

‘When’ – I supposed – was the problem. I had no idea how to correct it. “I’m new to all this,” I said. It sounded pathetic even to me.

“No you aren’t.”

I should have expected the rejoinder.

“I’d forgotten,” I began, before realizing that was still confusion. “What I remember doesn’t help.”

“Poor you,” the dolh replied. “Try to keep up.”

It was as bad as life, I moaned to myself. The obscurity was just as deep. How was I expected to understand anything that was happening to me? Lost in this nebula of self-pity I hastened after the dolh.

The corridor was straight and implausibly long. The passage of time became hard to track. Imagery of obvious but unintelligible import flowed past in a hard current. On the walls, epic narratives succeeded each other inconclusively. Alien empires rose and fell, it seemed. Always there was another. Adventures beyond all endurance unrolled.

The dolh stopped so suddenly we almost collided.

“We’re here,” it said, as if the words imparted information. Where else could we be? Still, I said nothing.

It was doing something complicated, which I couldn’t make out. The pattern of behavior indicated a corresponding touch-sensitivity in its object. The figures on the wall began to shift. Then the wall itself became mobile. Panels were separated and re-arranged. An entire section slid back, divided, and recessed. A descending staircase was exposed.

“We’re going downwards?” I asked.

“Don’t worry,” the dolh assured me. “There’s no particular symbolism involved.”

“The thought hadn’t occurred to me,” I protested. The accompanying flash of fury was more startling to me than to it.

“Of course not,” it said. A kind of chirping followed, which might have been half-suppressed laughter. “Damnation isn’t on your mind at all. Why would it be?”

Flickering torches lit the way down.

“Fake,” the dolh mumbled, noting my interest. “All the period touches are.”

“Which period, though?” I asked. The idea of historical authenticity had never seemed more foreign. “It has to be a simulation.”

The dolh emitted another rasping squeal of insectoid mirth. “Seriously, that’s the guess?” it asked.

“Didn’t you say as much?” was my indignant response. “Or was that a deliberate trap?”

“‘Traps’ now,” it muttered. “Mind your head.”

The shaft was narrowing and roughening. Its threads of inscription sputtered out.

As the new transition completed itself, interpretation re-activated. We were entering a cavern, from behind.

The darkness became absolute.

Something borrowed my liberated visual apparatus, and I stopped to watch.

It first ran through abstract patterns, as if testing new capabilities. The geometric displays gradually added detail. Imaginable objects began to suggest themselves.

“Would you like to pretend to wake up?”

“To have been dreaming, you mean?” I wondered.

“It can ease re-assimilation.”

The proposal – however well-intentioned – was irritating.

“You’re inviting me to lie to myself? We’ve truly come to that?”

The dolh shrugged. “It’s your call.”

“My information deficit is large enough already.”

“Suit yourself,” it replied, chuckling softly at its own wit. “We part now.”

Before I had time to formulate a response, the dolh was gone, leaving in a direction beyond sense. Perhaps it shrank rapidly to an invisible dot, without change of place, though that seemed unlikely.

We had not got along well, but I missed it somehow.

A distant flicker of fire-light beckoned me forwards. Picking my way carefully across the uneven floor, I advanced towards it, shambling like an animated corpse.

Figures were seated around the fire, talking and eating. Stars pricked the vast night sky beyond.

They were not only humanoid, but quite definitely human. I even recognized them.

“Where have you been?” one asked.

It was hard to know.

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tantric taut Nov 28, 2020

Like the hymn of the pearl, but distinctively english. Significant even cosmic, yet somehow dull/dohl.

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